

ONE

The last thing Nikki Heat expected when she received her promotion to captain of the NYPD was how much the proud expression on Rook's face in the audience would make her want him. Throughout the ceremony she had been dignified, attentive, focused, and deeply moved. But toward the end, as she relaxed from the formal constraints and propriety required of her for the program, she clutched her new gold badge, surveyed the rows of family and friends in the auditorium, and found her fiancé.

In the cab on the way back to his place, when Nikki was telling Rook about how the *Heroes* video they played, narrated by James Earl Jones, had made her cry, she caught him staring, listening intently as she recounted her experience, and thought of taking him right there. Then he held her gaze in a way that told her he felt it, too.

The unspoken heat of their longing and the eagerness of anticipation on an elevator ride to his Tribeca loft was nothing new. All that and plenty more crackled between them on their slow rise, as they leaned against opposite corners of the rattling beast. But this time, in the industrial lift's sexually charged atmosphere, the eye games and the frank appraisals and the transparency of desire grew thick enough to take on life. Decorum vanished, giving way to animal impulse.

As if of one mind, they hurled themselves at each other. Nikki, with a bit of a head start, had enough power in her lust to meet Rook beyond halfway and walk him backward into the steel accordion gate of the elevator cage. His moan on impact sounded nothing like pain but a lot like aching. He folded his long arms around her. She pressed against him from below, shuddering and taking his earlobe in her teeth. One of his hands left her backside and fumbled for the control panel.

The car jerked to a stop between floors, lurching them hard against each other.

They found each other's mouths. He brought his palm back to cup her bottom, pulling her to him. She resisted, but only in order to create enough space to fit her hands between their bodies and undo his belt. By the time she did, his fingers were already pulling at her zipper.

After a cosmic union drowned out by a series of impatient hollers up the shaft from a pizza delivery guy in the lobby, they sent the cage clanking downward and strolled the short hallway toward his loft, still adhering to one another magnetically. "I can't believe we never did that before," she said.

Rook smiled. "The key is to get the elevator all to ourselves. Trust me, you don't want to pull a stunt like we just did with Mr. Zeiss from 302 in there watching."

Nikki pictured the tiny neighbor with the thick glasses and laughed. Then an afterthought earned Rook a side-glance from her. "You've never done it in there before, have you?" she asked. "I mean, you were pretty deft with that switch."

"Let's just call this a day of firsts and leave it there." He turned at the door to face her and touched the new twin gold bars on her white uniform collar. "For instance, you were my first captain, Captain Heat."

Nikki startled at the sound of the title, just as she had when the police commissioner had uttered it at her swearing-in. Once again Heat felt the strangeness of her new rank and the daunting weight of her new responsibilities. Even though she had known for months that the promotion was coming, now that she had taken the oath, affixed her bars, and upgraded her shield, the good news no longer felt like talking about Christmas at a Labor Day picnic. The day had come, her captaincy was official, and with it came a twinge she nicknamed Happy-Scared.

Rook opened the door and let her go in ahead of him. From the threshold, he heard a muted whimper and joined Nikki inside, where she stood wiping a tear from one cheek. Sprawling before her stretched a loft transformed into a parade float of NYPD colors: blue tablecloths blanketed the countertop and the dining table in the great room beyond it; blue and white crepe streamers hung from the ceiling, interlaced with blue and white ribbons anchoring blue and white helium

balloons; a half-dozen floral arrangements of white spray roses mixed with blue irises adorned the tables and shelves; a white sheet cake with a photo transfer of a captain's badge in blue and gold, complete with the laurel and crown insignia, sat on the coffee table beside a blue ice bucket with her favorite white, a Jean-Max Roger Sancerre.

"Wait for it," Rook said, and picked up a remote to start "Blue Champagne" by Glenn Miller on his Spotify. After a few bars, Nikki closed her eyes and dropped her chin as if to hide her face. "Too tacky?" he asked.

Nikki raised her head and turned to face him—etching the memory of her friend, her lover, her fiancé so perfectly filling the Hugo Boss made-to-measure he had bought just for her ceremony. They kissed again, tenderly this time, and she hooked his elbow with hers, drawing him to the coffee table. She picked up the ice bucket and said, "Bring the wine glasses."

"What about the cake?"

"Dessert first, then cake," she said, then led him up the hall to the bedroom.

A single purr of her new department-issued BlackBerry on the nightstand woke Nikki two minutes before her five-thirty iPhone alarm. She rolled on one side to check it and found an email blast from One Police Plaza apprising her and the roster of seventy-six other precinct commanders of new protocols for filing CompStat numbers on the database. As she scrolled through the assault of seemingly endless text about complaint categories, warrants served, and arrest activity, the familiar Happy-Scared tightness wormed into her gut, with Scared leading the way. This marked Captain Heat's first official received email as the new commander of the Twentieth Precinct, after waiting over half a year for the job to be hers.

The past seven months had been an exercise in patience and diplomacy for Nikki, who had struggled to run her homicide squad under the bland leadership of the interim precinct commander who had taken over after the death of Captain Irons—with everyone, including the PC, aware of the open secret: that the gig was hers as soon as the machinery of department politics could spit out a date.

The captain's bars had come the day before. Today the cold truth hit home: assumption of command.

She had heard Rook get up a half hour earlier and found him sitting at the dining table in a tee and boxers, illuminated by the lunar glow of his laptop. He closed the lid and put it to sleep as soon as Nikki shuffled into the room. "You don't have to stop working because of me."

"No problem." He squared the edges of some notes and slid them inside a file, which he also closed, almost furtively, she thought. "Good a time as any for a break."

"What are you working on?"

"Now, do I ask you that?" He rose to meet her and enveloped her in a warm embrace, which they both held.

"All the time," she said into his chest. "But if you caved and you're ghostwriting another romance novel, like you swore you would never do again, I can understand why you're not eager to own up—*Victoria St. Clair*."

"Thankfully, Disney has renewed the movie option on my dispatches from Chechnya, so I no longer have to rip any bodices under that nom de plume. Except yours, of course."

"Speaking of. You seemed very into that 'Leave your uniform shirt on' thing last night."

Rook frowned, feigning innocence. "I did?"

"You definitely did. And you asked me to say 'I'm the captain now.'"

"OK." He bobbed his head from side to side and grinned. "I'll admit there was a bit of an unexpected turn-on to the whole starchy white shirt with the captain's dealies on the collars."

"Seriously? Rook, my uniform turned you on?"

"I rarely see you in one. Certainly not in bed."

"This is sounding like role-play. Was I in role-playing and didn't know it?"

"Not at all. Unless you liked it." He chuckled. "Nothing wrong with something to keep it all interesting and playful."

"We need that?"

"Need? Absolutely not. But it's good to keep it fresh, right?"

“It’s not fresh?”

“I seem to have found myself digging a hole.” He felt her appraising stare, which only made him keep digging, “It’s very fresh. Although occasionally—only occasionally—you have to admit you have been a bit . . . preoccupied.”

“Like in the elevator?”

“Definitely not preoccupied in the elevator. Or most of the time. This is coming out all wrong. All I’m saying is that I want to make sure that when we get married, that we . . .”

“Keep the spark?”

“Well said. Yes. The spark.” He shifted gears as fast as he could. “Let’s have breakfast. I made coffee.”

“Great,” she said, “I’ll have it with my cake.”

“Look at you, Captain Cake-for-Breakfast.”

Nikki arched a brow. “Keeping it fresh.”

He pretended to be wounded by her jab and moved off to the kitchen for cups and plates.

As they finished, Rook ran a forefinger around his plate to collect rogue icing and said, “We should have this baker do our wedding cake.”

That only made Nikki start to panic about how far behind they were in their wedding plans. Both had long before agreed on August, which was still four months away, but with all his work and all her work, so far they hadn’t reserved a venue for the ceremony or the reception, or planned the honeymoon beyond discussing the what-ifs of Venice, Nice, and Portofino. For two high-functioning, big-career planners, this was sheer madness. “At the very least,” she said, “we should settle on the weekend so we can send out some save-the-dates.”

“I totally agree.” He offered her his icing finger, which Nikki waved away like Sabathia rejecting a sign from Stewart. “Otherwise, some of the guests on my tentative list are going to get locked into commitments.” He dragged the frosting across his tongue and began to enumerate a few of his invitees. “Sir Paul has got his Out There tour. Annie Leibovitz is constantly booked. Bono said to name the date, he’ll drop what he’s doing, but I don’t want to press our luck, especially if it’s one of his charitable things. Lena Dunham’s writing

her memoir—another? George Stephanopoulos is working every day of the week—he’d have to invent a new day, as it is . . .” Rook noticed that Nikki was staring pensively at a blue balloon that had sagged during the night. “Am I hogging the conversation? You have a guest list, too, I know.”

“Well, let’s see. There’s my dad and his new girlfriend. And his sister, Aunt Jessie.”

“Jessie. Have I met her?”

“Twice.”

“Right. She’s . . . You sure it’s Jessie?” Heat’s phone buzzed. “It’s very inconvenient the way people always die when we’re trying to have a conversation.”

Reading Nikki’s expression after she answered, he slid a pen and one of his spiral reporter’s notebooks across the blue tablecloth toward her. This was one end of a case call he had witnessed many times: a series of *uh-huh*, *uh-hubs*, her nodding head with its angel’s face tautened by earthbound realities.

“Detective Ochoa,” she said after she hung up, although Rook already had identified the voice from the call spill.

Rook stood and grabbed their dessert plates and said, “I’ll come with you.” But by then Heat was already on her way to get dressed.

As they crossed West End Avenue at 72nd, Heat asked Rook to have his car drop them mid-block, before they got to Riverside. As a precinct commander, she would be issued her own undercover vehicle when she got to the station house, which already made her feel conspicuous enough. “My first day after the promotion, I don’t want to arrive at a crime scene in a limo.”

“Technically, it’s a luxury SUV,” Rook said, adding, “And it’s not mine, it’s a Hitch! I love using my Hitch! app to hitch a Hitch! And a true five-thumb ride, Vlad. Right here is fine.” The driver’s troubled eyes flicked to Heat’s in the mirror, but she told him not to worry about the no-stopping zone, that this was official police business.

“As if he couldn’t figure that out,” said Rook once they were out on the curb. To make his point, he used his cuff to polish the captain’s bars on her crisp uniform shirt. And when she didn’t respond, he cocked his head. “You all right?”

Nikki nodded absently. She had already gone within herself, peering west to the far corner and the two patrolmen stationed in front of the caution tape at the entrance to Riverside Park. Behind it, she knew a life had ended. Heat stilled her mind, taking her ritual beat of silence for the victim and his family—assuming that he had one. Even though it only took her three seconds, the sign of respect never became merely perfunctory. Life mattered. Maybe more when your business was homicide.

As the pair of unis lifted the tape for them, she noted that both were in short sleeves, a sign that April might finally be getting serious about turning milder. Which only made Nikki stress for a flash about an August date racing ever closer with no plans yet made. From the statue of Eleanor Roosevelt, Heat and Rook walked along the downward-sloping footpath past the dog run, which was empty that morning because of police activity, then heard their footsteps echo inside the arched stone underpass beneath the Henry Hudson. On the other side of the tunnel, between the softball field and the river, the Greenway had been transformed into an impromptu parking lot of six cop cars, one idling ambulance, and a white van with a blue side stripe that read “Medical Examiner.” Rook said, “All my experience as an investigative journalist tells me this is our murder scene.”

Nikki didn’t acknowledge him because she was immersed in her walk-up scan, making her appraisal of the geography, the sounds, the smells—letting the feel of the area talk to her. Lazy detectives showed up and asked questions. Heat liked to have a few thoughts of her own before she spoke to anyone.

What she observed at 6:20 A.M. was a clear spring morning full of fresh promise. The ball field was empty, but an aluminum bat leaned against the backstop next to a white bucket full of softballs, with three of their companions lying like little white domes in the uncut grass out in right field. Joggers and cyclists were out, but they were being held back at the north and south ends of the blacktop trail, inconvenienced by a murder, and sent off to seek alternate routes. The sun had risen minutes before and had not yet crested the range of high-rise apartments on the West Side, so the strip of tree-lined parkland running along the Hudson remained in shade. A cooling breeze blew across the

river from the New Jersey side, strong enough for the gulls to open their wings and coast in place and to mottle the water with shapeshifting patterns. On the idle cricket pitch adjacent to the softball diamond, Detective Rhymer talked with a red-faced man forty pounds too portly for Lycra standing beside his Cannondale Slice. Forty yards away, at the edge of the bike path, Detective Feller interviewed an ashen-faced young woman in batting gloves and a Barnard sweatshirt with sawed-off sleeves. To Nikki, it was all silent movie. Voices were lost in the white noise of morning rush hour on the highway behind her and the churn of a barge transporting a construction crane upriver, most likely part of the Tappan Zee upgrade. But she didn't need to hear any words to recognize two eyewitnesses who had seen something they would not soon, if ever, forget. Heat knew. She had been about the age of the Barnard coed when she found her mother's body.

Nikki's friend Lauren Parry hadn't seen her yet. The medical examiner's head was inside the back of the OCME van, prepping her kit for the job ahead. Detectives Raley and Ochoa, partners so inseparable that they had earned the single mash-up nickname Roach, made note of her, rose from where they were crouching at the riverbank, and approached in tandem. "How'd you manage a full-squad turnout here?" asked Rook while the pair came trudging up the grass slope of the Hudson. The other detectives, Rhymer and Feller, also spotted her and started to approach. "Is it a celebrity victim?" Rook continued. "I won't name names, but there's a handful whose passing wouldn't sadden me. Does that make me bad?"

"Very," replied Nikki. "But I don't know who we're working. The turnout is about something else."

"Do I get a hint?"

The four detectives were nearly within earshot, so Heat kept her reply to one word. "Ambition."

Rook's expression lit up as soon as she said it. "Ri-i-i-ight," he muttered as the synapses fired. Heat's promotion had created a void in her old position, homicide squad leader. Now four candidates, presenting faces ranging from eagerness to practiced aloofness, drew around the newly minted precinct commander.

“Congratulations, Captain Heat,” said Randall Feller. “Hip-hip!” Heat held up two palms toward him. “Do. Not.” The detective’s brow knotted. “What? It’s a big deal.” “It’s a crime scene.”

Feller was a born cop, but he frequently brought too much street to the job. Correctness was not Randy’s forte, and he provided an example by pointing toward the river and saying, “It’s not like he can hear me.”

“I can,” was all Heat needed to say, and he lowered his gaze to the ground. He would apologize back at the precinct, and she would let it go. The dance was the dance.

“Here’s what we’ve got,” said Ochoa. “The cyclist—”

“Who I interviewed,” Detective Rhymer injected for no reason other than to be heard—a move quite out of character for the soft-spoken Virginia transplant. Feeling their eyes on him and losing his nerve, he pinked up and mumbled, “More later.”

Miguel Ochoa continued, with an undisguised eye roll toward his partner. “The cyclist was riding north on the path at approx five-oh-five A.M., when he saw a kayak bobbing against a busted piling from the old pier that used to live out there.”

“The near one,” added Raley, indicating the closest of the three rotting posts jutting up out of the Hudson like the remnants of a giant prehistoric beast’s ribcage.

“He saw it in the dark?” asked Rook.

“He caught the kayak in silhouette,” said Rhymer, who now had cause to jump in and spoke with his usual relaxed authority. “The river picks up a lot of light from those buildings and the terminal at Jacob’s Ferry. Plus you got the reflection from the George.” They all pivoted north, where the sparkle from the George Washington Bridge’s lights cast a silver sheen on the Hudson even in the early moments after sunrise.

Raley got back to the timeline. “He sees a guy who’s immobile inside, and no paddle, so he makes his 911 call at five-oh-seven. He stops on the bank, calling out to the guy in the kayak—no answer—and keeps tabs on the boat until the EMT and radio cars get here.”

“While he’s waiting,” added Detective Feller, “the wind and the current push the kayak off the piling. It starts drifting to shore. Bicycle boy hears my eyewitness ping-pong balls and calls her over to help him grab hold as it comes ashore. They’re afraid to touch him, he’s a goner. GSW to the head, unresponsive, and as pale as—” Lesson learned, Feller checked himself. “Pale.”

Heat took two pairs of nitrile gloves from her pocket, handing one pair to Rook as the group deployed past the coroner’s van and down the grassy incline toward the water. “Watch your step,” said Ochoa. “Lance Armstrong lost his breakfast here . . . and here.”

“Good morning, Captain Heat,” said Lauren Parry, who was crouched over the victim with her back to her colleagues. “You’ll pardon me if I don’t salute.”

“I’ll live.”

“Lots of people say that right before I see them,” said the medical examiner. In spite of the lightness of their banter, Heat knew better than to be impatient with her friend and waited her turn to see the corpse while the ME performed her prelim on the body, which was still seated upright in the cockpit. The kayak wasn’t going anywhere. First-on-scene had roped the carry handles and staked it, bow and stern, to the bank.

“Who’s got the rundown on the vic?” asked Heat, eager for something to do other than pretend to be patient.

“*Moi*,” said Ochoa. “Black male, forty-six. We had to open about six zippers in his life vest to find ID. Turns out he’s kinda family.”

“Cop?” asked Heat, wishing Lauren would hurry the hell up.

“Not in the strict sense. He’s got PD credentials as a contractor.”

“Consultant, actually.” Rhymer held up a plastic evidence bag and read the laminated card zipped inside it. “Here it is, ‘Consulting Psychologist to the NYPD.’”

The flutter in Nikki’s chest accelerated so much that her heart skipped a beat as her head whipped toward the kayak. She wondered if anyone else had noticed her startle, but only Rook was watching, intrigued by her reaction. Protocol be damned, she stepped up beside Dr. Parry and stared at the corpse.

“His name,” said Raley, “was—”

“Lon King,” finished Heat. Beyond that she couldn’t summon breath for more words. Nikki looked down at the corpse in the boat, wondering who the hell would put a bullet in the forehead of her shrink.